

THE LAUNCHPAD

By **Ambika Varghese**
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Good morning, Paula.



In today's newsletter:

- Houston's Vietnamese nail salons trace their roots to [refugee camps, community bonds and women-led businesses](#), revealing a legacy shaped by war, migration and resilience.
- Houston ISD students who began school learning English as a second language are [now claiming top academic honors](#). Their academic superpower: being bilingual.
- Plans to rebuild Houston's adaptive rec center are finally picking up steam — [with \\$11.5 million in hand](#). Neighbors are helping shape what comes next for this long-neglected community space.



Coming Monday: We bring you a special three-part investigation into Houston's growing waste crisis, reported with MIT. From shrinking landfill space to environmental injustice, reporter **Elena Bruess** unpacks what's at stake — and what solutions could look like. You'll find all that right here in the Launchpad.



How Vietnamese families built community, revolutionized nail industry over 50 years



Annie Mulligan for Houston Landing

When Van Nguyen opened Montrose Nails two decades ago, it wasn't just a business — it was a family enterprise, a cultural touchstone and a piece of a larger story that began after [the fall of Saigon](#).

Fifty years later, salons like hers remain vital hubs for Houston's Vietnamese community, reflecting a national industry shaped by refugee resettlement, **Fiza Kuzhiyil** reports.

These salons are more than an economic driver. They're a gathering space and a support system. But that success has come with steep challenges: low wages, exposure to hazardous chemicals and persistent inequality.

This story is the last in our series examining how Houston's Vietnamese community continues to shape the city 50 years after the fall of Saigon through businesses, civic life and a cultural presence rooted in resilience.

From the series:

- [50 years later, the fall of Saigon still resonates throughout Houston's Vietnamese diaspora](#)
- [Despite size, Houston's Vietnamese population lags when it comes to political engagement](#)
- [Justice proves elusive in son's search for Houston Viet journalist's killers 40 years later](#)

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HISD grads are dominating the valedictorian ranks



Lexi Parra / Houston Landing

Houston ISD students who started school as non-native English speakers have outperformed their peers in claiming valedictorian over the past decade, **Asher Lehrer-Small** reports. These students represent approximately 46% of all HISD valedictorians while making up only 44% of high school seniors during that period.

Breaking barriers: The achievement is notable given linguistic and cultural barriers and [disparagement of immigrant families](#) at the highest levels of government. Their success speaks to the motivation and hard work that many Houstonians can relate to.

Motivation and sacrifice: Frank Castellanos, the 2023 valedictorian at Challenge Early College High School, feels indebted to his immigrant parents: "They went through a perilous time so that you can have a better life than they did."

ESL Superpower: Many valedictorians see their bilingualism as an advantage. Speaking Spanish helps them understand scientific terms with Latin roots while staying connected to their heritage.

Big picture: While celebrating these successes, HISD's multilingual education director, Sonya Monreal, acknowledges that more work remains: "For every group of students that has made it, we have a large group of students who haven't. Our goal is to make sure that all of our students have a fighting chance."

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Latest from the Landing



DIVERSE COMMUNITIES

[With \\$11.5M in funding, Houston starts planning redevelopment of its adaptive recreation center](#)

By **Monique Welch**



PUBLIC SAFETY

[CFPB, DOJ & Colony Ridge request pause in reverse redlining lawsuit for mediation talks](#)

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[Houston Landing honored by National Headliner Award in local news category](#)

By **Maggie Gordon**

[Houston Landing wins two Texas Managing Awards; collects 13 total awards](#)

By **Tim Carlin**

What we're reading

Houston ISD will overhaul transportation next school year to [reduce costs and long bus ride times](#). The district will replace 125 office positions with 155 new ones and partner with METRO, allowing high schoolers to use district-funded passes. Parents will be able to apply directly with the transportation department. **(Houston Chronicle, paywall)**

In the summer of 2020, Hispanics in Texas accounted for [half of all COVID-19 deaths](#). After witnessing devastating loss, Hispanic Texans were among the most likely to get immunized when the vaccines became available and, by 2024, reversed this trend, making up less than a quarter of deaths from the disease. **(Texas Tribune)**

Texas lawmakers voted to require Harris County to [send 30% of its extra toll road funds to Houston](#) to pay for emergency services on toll roads. County precincts will split the remaining 70% based on the miles of roads in each precinct. County commissioners say state lawmakers did not consult them on the matter. **(Houston Public Media)**



You made it! Thanks for starting your day with us, Paula.



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Paula Solis contributed to this newsletter.